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## Senators urge passage of their drug bill

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By PAMELA KROPF  
GANNETT STATE BUREAU

TRENTON -- U.S. Sens. Jon Corzine and Frank Lautenberg, Ds-NJ, Monday urged acceptance of the Senate version of the Medicare prescription drug bill which could add more than \$300 million a year to the state's prescription drug program.

The House and Senate passed different versions of the bill, which are being reviewed by a conference committee. Corzine said he hopes members will craft a compromise this month.

"This bill will guarantee prescription drug coverage to every senior citizen, rather than relying on private insurers to provide coverage, as does the House-passed Republican drug bill," Corzine said. "It also ensures that seniors will have coverage all year."

"The bill is not perfect," Lautenberg said. "However, it (is) the best opportunity to provide our seniors with some level of help with the skyrocketing costs of prescription drugs."

The senators successfully amended the Senate bill to allow New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania -- which have pre-existing, generous drug benefits -- to use the money to cover existing drug costs. Without this funding, there would be a huge hole in the budget for New Jersey's prescription programs, Gov. James E. McGreevey's spokesman, Micah Rasmussen, said.

The \$300 million in federal funds would fund New Jersey's

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Pharmaceutical Assistance for the Aged and Disabled (PAAD) and Senior Gold programs, which provide comprehensive prescription drug coverage to more than 200,000 low-income seniors and disabled people in the state. Seniors enrolled in PAAD currently pay \$5 for each prescription and there are no deductibles or premiums in either program. New Jersey is home to more than 1.2 million seniors.

Both senators said if their amendment was not included in the final bill, they would not vote for prescription drug benefits.

"A federal prescription drug benefit should not come at the price of New Jerseyans giving up current benefits," Lautenberg said. "The provisions we inserted will help preserve the benefits many New Jersey seniors already receive from the state."

McGreevey praised the senators for their amendment.

"Thanks to Senators Corzine and Lautenberg ... New Jersey's seniors can rest assured that our well-established, successful state prescription drug programs will remain strong and vibrant for the foreseeable future," McGreevey said.

Douglas Johnston, government affairs officer for the New Jersey chapter of AARP, said the amendment would help New Jersey's seniors.

"It's a fantastic thing the senators have done," Johnston said. "This will help (New Jersey's) budget."

Lautenberg said Republicans are the real challenge to passing the bill.

U.S. Republican Reps. James Saxton, R-Mount Holly, and Christopher Smith, R-Hamilton, were unavailable for comment.

Staffers in Corzine's office said no strong opposition for the amendment has been argued.

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